

# Terror Crime Prevention: Constructing Muslim Practices and Beliefs as 'Anti-Social' and 'Extreme' through CONTEST 2

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# Terror Crime Prevention: Constructing Muslim Practices and Beliefs as ‘Anti-Social’ and ‘Extreme’ through CONTEST 2

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*This article discusses recent research into engagement and partnership work between Muslim communities and police for the purposes of counter-terrorism. It is argued that asserting a notion of ‘shared values’ as a foundational criterion for choosing which individuals/groups to engage in countering terrorism is strategically flawed. Not only is the notion of ‘values’ overly diffuse and conceptually ill-defined, it is dangerous in its potential to construct even the most normative Muslim practices and beliefs as ‘anti-social’ and ‘extreme’. This is likely to further alienate Muslim communities in general and to exclude those groups with whom the State has so far successfully engaged to counter terrorism. The article further reflects upon engagement and partnership work between police and Muslim minorities perceived as ‘radical’, highlighting how the goal of terror crime prevention can be – and is – shared between police and communities, despite negative and stigmatizing impacts of the ‘War on Terror’.*

## Introduction

Since 9/11, the prevention of Al-Qa’ida inspired and/or instigated terror-related crimes has become a significant policy issue internationally, in countries across Europe, South Asia, North America, the Middle East and Australasia. In the UK, community-based approaches to the prevention of violent extremism have been increasingly drawn upon and applied across a wide range of sectors, including criminal justice, education, health and housing contexts, consisting of multi-agency approaches involving local authorities, police, probation, prisons, education, youth justice and other services. Since 7/7 in particular, community-based approaches to counter-terrorism have gained increasing prominence with the Prevent strand within the government’s main counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST (HMG, 2006), gaining in ascendancy. This has been recently reinforced through the publication of CONTEST 2 (HMG, 2009), which highlights the continued centrality of Prevent in British policy towards countering terrorism.

The involvement of Muslim communities in the prevention of terror crime raises many questions around effectiveness, appropriateness and impacts on Muslim citizens, some of which have previously been raised by Spalek and Imtoul (2007) and Spalek and Lambert (2008). Building upon this critical approach, this article aims to focus on the issues raised by the newly prominent notion of ‘shared values’, and construction of ‘grievance’ in CONTEST 2, particularly in relation to their impact on communities and counter-terrorism practices. Specifically, we argue that asserting a notion of ‘shared values’

as a foundational criterion for choosing which individuals/groups to engage in countering terrorism is strategically flawed. Not only is the notion of 'values' overly diffuse and conceptually ill-defined, it is dangerous in its potential for such breadth of interpretation as to construct even the most normative Muslim practices and beliefs as 'anti-social' and 'extreme'. We argue that the subsequent alienation of the very communities needed and expected to aid counter-terrorism efforts is further cemented through the apparent intention to regulate the definition of legitimacy or illegitimacy of certain expressions of dissent and grievance. Moreover, we present data from a recently completed research study examining engagement and partnership work between police and communities within a counter-terrorism context in order to highlight that engagement and partnership work can take place with those deemed 'radical', even though these groups are in danger of being ostracised from counter-terror work due to the focus on 'shared values' and 'legitimate channels for grievance' within CONTEST 2.

It is important to note that within the issues raised by this chapter, similarities to anti-social behaviour (ASB) governance interventions can be drawn. For example, Prior and Spalek (2008) have raised concerns about the ways in which ASB is constructed as a problem in particular circumstances, and the influence that ethnicity or faith might have on the meanings that are attached to ASB. Importantly, Prior and Spalek (2008) raise questions about the ways in which ASB officials construct 'difference', particularly in relation to minority ethnic communities and about what the role of 'stereotypes' may be in constructions of difference (see Prior, this collection). Moreover, in relation to ASB, it seems that officials make judgements about the acceptability or non-acceptability of certain interventions in certain communities, prompting concerns about the validity of such judgements (Prior and Spalek, 2008). At the same time, ASB can be criticised for being targeted at groups of individuals deemed 'dangerous' and so may be fuelled by moral panics around certain groupings of individuals, leading to net-widening – an issue that has clear links to the targeting of Muslim communities under the 'New Terror' discourse and counter-terrorism legislation.

### **Preventing Violent Extremism: CONTEST and CONTEST 2**

Prior to the events of 7 July 2005, within the government's original counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, the Pursue strand was dominant, involving 'hard' policing and engagement tactics, including surveillance, intelligence gathering, the use of informants and the implementation of a number of anti-terror laws. This approach was consistent with the prevalent adoption of the notion and narrative of 'New Terrorism' by security experts and government officials (Mythen and Walklate, 2006), which in declaring 'Islamist' terrorism an unprecedented and unpredictable danger greatly contributed to the construction of Muslim minorities as 'suspect', necessitating state surveillance and control. Young British Muslim men in particular have been profiled and categorised as constituting a 'problem group' and even a 'fifth column enemy within' by media, politicians, the security services and criminal justice agencies. Within such a context, it is therefore unsurprising that 'hard' policing tactics have been applied to Muslim communities in particular, resulting in increased alienation and the generation of distrust amongst individuals and community organisations (Spalek *et al.*, 2009).

More recently, 'softer' approaches to countering terrorism have gained increasing prominence as the Prevent strand within the government's CONTEST strategy has become

increasingly significant. Within the Prevent strand, the police and local authorities are expected to lead strategies aimed at preventing violent extremism (PVE), working with wide-ranging bodies, including representatives from the education sector, children's and youth services, probation and prison services, with Muslim communities being viewed as key partners (HMG, 2008). Its rise in significance relates directly to the limited impact of military intervention (Findlay, 2008) and the subsequent focus on alternative responses, such as criminal justice, community development and cohesion.

Within policy documents as well as within the concept itself, Prevent both contributes to the construction of, and is itself founded upon, notions of the 'New Terror' international security threat. Building on CONTEST 1, CONTEST 2, the government's most recent counter-terrorism strategy, begins with a narrative of this 'new terrorism', thus embedding and highlighting the notion as its context and as the normative government understanding. Within this view, the link between local and global is focussed upon with respect to Al-Qa'ida networks (HMG, 2009: 9):

The threat to the UK (and to many other countries) now comes primarily from four sources: the Al-Qa'ida leadership and their immediate associates, located mainly on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border; terrorist groups affiliated to Al-Qa'ida in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, and Yemen; 'self-starting' networks, or even lone individuals, motivated by an ideology similar to that of Al-Qa'ida, but with no connection to that organisation; and terrorist groups that follow a broadly similar ideology as Al-Qa'ida but which have their own identity and regional agenda. All these groups respond to local challenges and grievances. But Al-Qa'ida has sought to bring them together into a single global movement.

The significance of this narrative is in its justification for why Prevent – and CONTEST 2 in general – should be targeted predominantly at Muslim communities. Thus, despite the CONTEST 2 document acknowledging that other forms of extremism are also of concern to the government and will also be appropriately challenged, such as animal rights and dissident Irish Republicanism, the general and unproblematised use of terminology relating to Muslim communities throughout the counter-terrorism strategy fails to depict the reality that even the terms 'Muslim' and 'community' are complex, contested and multiple (Edwards and Hughes, 2002; Garland *et al.*, 2006). The resulting narrative thus problematically homogenises Muslim communities, and places all Muslims at the heart of British counter-terrorism policies and practices.

### The research study

This article draws on a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the ESRC Religion and Society programme, headed 'An Examination of Partnership Approaches to Challenging Religiously-Endorsed Violence involving Muslim Groups and Police'.<sup>1</sup> The study examined the following questions:

- What are the key components to effective partnership work between police and Muslim groups for counter-terror purposes? What is meant by 'partnership work', and how does this differ from other forms of engagement? How do different participants view partnership?
- How, and in what ways, might partnership work be compromised?

- How, and in what ways, are the experiences and religious knowledge of Muslim groups working with the police important to the development of counter-terror strategies?
- How do Muslim groups challenge religiously, or other, endorsed violence in counter-terror partnerships developed between themselves and the police?
- What are the structures and processes of Muslim/police partnership?

In total 42 individuals were interviewed. Thirteen of these participants were police officers – members of the MCU (Muslim Contact Unit, Metropolitan Police), NCTT (National Communities Tension Team) and ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers); and 29 were members of Muslim communities and organisations involved to varying levels in partnership/engagement work with the police, either through the MSF or directly with the MCU or NCTT. Interviews took place between December 2007 and July 2008. At the same time, researchers attended and observed MSF community meetings and MSF meetings with senior police officers in Scotland Yard.

The study generated many critical findings. In particular, first, the study found that those community groups and individuals who are best placed to work with the police to reduce terror crime may be those who are perjoratively portrayed by ‘new terror’ discourse as being suspect and part of the problem rather than the solution to terrorism. Second, effective partnerships between community members and police may be formed based around the mutual goal of preventing terror crime. Third, that the ‘new terror’ discourse has helped to create the perception amongst Muslim communities that the War on Terror is really a war on Islam. Therefore, within a counter-terrorism context, it is important for engagement and partnership work to separate out wider political factors from the goal of preventing terror crime.

### Engaging ‘radicals’

Our study highlights that engaging marginal and marginalised Muslim groups, such as ‘Salafis’ and ‘Islamists’, is a logical continuum of the post 7/7 drive to support community led, faith-based approaches to youth work, education and de-radicalisation central to the Prevent agenda. Partnership and positive relations that are inclusive of all Muslim groups ensures that trust and bridge building is viewed as genuine and not subject to political trends and agendas, which may alienate communities and shut down dialogue necessary to the twin government aims of cohesion and de-radicalisation. Disengagement has in itself been understood as increasing the likelihood of violent action (Briggs *et al.*, 2006: 11). Our study further highlights that the success of ‘radical engagement’ is rooted in the ability of ‘Salafi’ and ‘Islamist’ groups to level with and engage effectively and persuasively with individuals who are susceptible, or who already hold violent extremist perspectives: that is, a number – but by no means all – of groups self-identifying as ‘Salafi’ or ‘Islamist’ who have the knowledge about, and shared experience, backgrounds and credibility of young people vulnerable to or already engaged in violent discourse and action. Such a ‘street’ approach is invaluable to this form of countering terrorism. Our study finds that Muslim groups able to fully understand and communicate on a theological and political level with ‘extremists’ are better placed to assist and advise counter-terrorism practitioners than Muslims who have no experience in this area. Moreover, partnership with ‘radical’ communities opens up the potential for gaining insider knowledge and community intelligence from those with experience in dealing with violent extremists.

For example, community leaders who self-identify as ‘Salafi’ may have a long history of resisting and tackling violent extremist activities and may be willing to advise the police through the establishment of a trust-based, equal relationship that constitutes partnership. Additionally, by opening up channels of communication with some of the most marginalised communities, confidence in state institutions may be built, increased and sustained, contributing to the cohesion that government strives for. Although police work here can carry the stigma that police officers are ‘appeasers of extremists’ (Lambert and Tupman, 2007: 6), our study supports the notion that police work with ‘radical groups’ can directly contribute to the tackling of violent extremism.

This positioning is not without its difficulties, however, given the current policy focus upon the notion of ‘shared values’ within CONTEST 2, a term used more commonly in relation to the concept of community cohesion as coined by Cantle (2001) in his report on the 2001 Northern Disturbances (Ritchie Report, 2001). It is interesting to note that the government narrative surrounding the disturbances is also related to the problem of ‘difference’, particularly in relation to Muslim communities and young men. This concept of ‘shared values’ is therefore developed through the prism of counter-terrorism – according to CONTEST 2 (HMG, 2009: 13):

we will take action against those who defend terrorism and violent extremism. We will also continue to challenge views which fall short of supporting violence and are within the law, but which reject and undermine our shared values and jeopardise community cohesion. Some of these views can create a climate in which people may be drawn into violent activity...

Problematically, the above paragraph – reflected in later sections in the document (ibid: 87) – lacks crucial precision: terms such as terrorism, extremism, shared values and community cohesion are diffuse and contested notions, open to a high degree of interpretation. This is perhaps unsurprising: as argued elsewhere, engagement work for the purposes of counter-terrorism is a highly politicised arena in which debates around broader, normative issues in relation to citizenship, multiculturalism and values continue to take place, profoundly influencing engagement work (Spalek and Lambert, 2008). This is reflective of state conceptions of Muslim communities, which, particularly since the 2001 Northern disturbances, and magnified by the London Bombings of July 2005 by young British Muslim men, have stressed through various policies the importance of socially engineering community relations through the promotion of ‘cohesion’ in the prevention of a wide range of social problems, including crime, anti-social behaviour, hate crime and the fear of crime.

Although there may be some resonance in targeting community divisions so as to foster better inter-community relations, particularly as there may be links between community divisions and hatred towards ‘racial’/ethnic/religious others, it is important to highlight that social and economic deprivation also play an important role in creating tension and prejudice. Indeed, according to a study of racially motivated offenders by Ray *et al.* (2004), while a breakdown in community contact and relations is a factor, economic context is crucial: offenders in their study lived in segregated communities in areas of high unemployment, particularly where the industries that had employed their parents and grandparents had collapsed. Such research therefore suggests that violence is not necessarily directly caused by racial and other forms of segregation, but rather is a result of wider social and economic processes linked to today’s post-industrial era.



Indeed, according to Young (1999), late modernity might be characterised as a world of separation and exclusion as a result of a series of social and economic processes that arose from the 1960s onwards, creating a world of uncertainty and risk.

The difficulty therefore of placing central importance to the notion of 'shared values' within CONTEST 2 is that local problems of socio-economic marginalisation and exclusion, and related inter- and intra-community tensions within ethnically and religiously diverse British cities, are conflated with the globally constructed social problem of international terrorism, particularly in relation to Al-Qa'ida linked or inspired terror threats. CONTEST 2 as a strategy and narrative might be viewed as being part of a wider dynamic that researchers have been highlighting and critiquing: through the hegemonic project of globalisation there is a quest for community at a global level, a war on pluralism and the construction of a 'war on terror' which has served to target and alienate those communities viewed as being opposed to Western modernisation (Simon, 2007; Findlay, 2008). CONTEST 2 can be criticised in that it enables the government to exclude potentially any Muslim group from engagement. This relates to narratives within the original CONTEST strategy in that Muslim identities that appear to value the Ummah<sup>2</sup> over feelings of Britishness, or who appear to isolate themselves from wider society, continue to be negatively judged and seen as a threat to social cohesion. In 2006, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) was attacked for taking its inspiration from political Islamism associated with reactionary movements in the Middle East and South Asia (Bright, 2006). Sensitive to these accusations, the government's response was to marginalise the MCB from engagement processes. More recently, in 2009 the government has distanced itself further from the MCB, because the Deputy Secretary-General, Dr Daud Abdullah, signed a declaration in Istanbul called in response to the Israeli bombing of Gaza. This has been interpreted by the government and critics of the MCB as calling for violence against Israel and condoning attacks on British troops. It appears that Muslim communities are being scrutinised to a far higher degree than other communities – as explored below – and so government policy is creating tension and fissures in any engagement and partnership work that is taking place between Muslims, state and other agencies.

Within the counter-terror maxim 'communities defeat terror' lays an inherent tension: the simultaneous definition of communities as both problem and solution. Drawing upon the wording of CONTEST 2, from a policy perspective the answer appears to lie in the identification of clear-cut binaries and assumptions: moderate Muslim groups/individuals/communities have a duty and an ability to identify and isolate radicals – those with illegitimate beliefs, politics, values, grievances, expression and dissent – in order to prevent terrorism. Indeed, in strategies being developed under Prevent within CONTEST 2, at the time of writing, factors such as political activism, narrow interpretations of the Qu'ran, travelling abroad, glorification of martyrdom and martyrs, alongside other factors, are being propagated by state agencies working with academics as signs of individuals' potential movements towards violent extremism, requiring active intervention and monitoring, and in some cases, reporting and referral. Nonetheless, the theoretical and empirical bases of such analyses are suspect, and, moreover, it is potentially possible to cast suspicion over any individual as the range of factors is so broad and encompasses majority rather than minority Muslim and other populations. It has therefore become commonplace to construct certain Muslim practices and beliefs not only as markers of difference, but barriers to 'positive community relations' as illustrated by Jack Straw's comments – as a public servant – on women's face coverings as a 'visible statement of



separation and of difference'.<sup>3</sup> In particular, a new dichotomy has been created in which Muslims are subject to categorisation into 'moderates' and 'radicals', with theological and political beliefs or 'values', and their related grievances deemed either legitimate or not. Thus, narratives found previously in American neo-conservative commentaries, such as the RAND Corporation's testimony 'Moderate and Radical Islam' (Rabasa 2005) have become mainstreamed into British government counter-terrorism strategy. Echoing the aforementioned wording of CONTEST 2 (HMG, 2009: 13) some four years earlier, for example, Rabasa asserts (*ibid.* 1):

In some cases, the term radical or militant is defined in terms of support for terrorism or other forms of violence. We believe that this is too narrow a focus, that there is, in fact, a much larger universe of fundamentalist or Salafi groups who may not themselves practice violence, but that propagate an ideology that creates the conditions for violence and that is subversive of the values of democratic societies.

Thus, any groups deemed 'radical' are, if not constructed as potential violent actors, categorised as creating an environment in which terrorist activity may be inspired or flourish.

Of note, practitioners are not necessarily passively receiving and responding to Prevent agenda inspired policies and practices because, as previously highlighted, police counter-terrorism practices – including government endorsed multi-agency projects (such as the Channel Programme, see HMG, 2009: 13) – have thus far exercised far more inclusive, less value-orientated approaches in the successful prevention of violence. These issues tie into a broader discussion relating to policy aims and the nature of counter-terrorism. Although current British strategy appears to have increased focus on the need for cohesive values amongst citizens, the foundational purpose is to prevent acts of terrorist violence. The success of police engagement with those who do not conform to government models of cohesion therefore fulfils this foundational purpose, but with the crucial benefits of long-term strategic gains.

### **Grievance within the Prevent strand of CONTEST 2**

Within the Prevent strand of CONTEST 2, much prominence and space is being given to the notion of grievance, whereby it is stated that in the next three years the Prevent work-stream will address the grievances which ideologues exploit and will also give people opportunities to air these grievances through legitimate channels (HMG, 2009: 12, 84). In relation to this, two key issues may be identified. Firstly, the notion that people can express their grievances through 'legitimate channels' conversely suggests that there are illegitimate channels through which to express grievances, as well as asserting that the government knows and can make a value judgement over which channels are legitimate and which channels are illegitimate. Thus, for example the kind of action undertaken by the Deputy-General of the MCB is deemed illegitimate by the government, even though his actions may carry resonance amongst many people, Muslim and non-Muslim. Secondly, there is a danger that 'grievance' within a policing context is narrowly conceived as responding to individuals' routine security concerns around issues such as anti-social behaviour or burglary through the predominant model of Neighbourhood Policing (NP). NP is explicitly linked to counter-terrorism activities in that it is argued that

‘neighbourhood policing is a process that can be harnessed to establish the presence of any suspicions about potential terrorist activities’ (Innes: 2006: 14). However, a broader understanding of ‘grievance’ may consist of issues and experiences that people care about and are emotionally affected by, thereby including but also going beyond anti-social behaviour and crime.

Our study highlights that international relations between nation states will influence British Muslim communities’ perceptions of the British state, influencing their engagement with and perceptions towards state actors, including the police. When engaging with members of Muslim communities, it is important to know about the issues that individuals care about and in the context of global politics this may include understanding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the dynamics taking place in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as in other countries around the world. This is no small undertaking given the multi-dimensional layers of the conflicts involved. Moreover, within these contexts there is no common acceptance of appropriate law and order responses (Findlay, 2007). These contestations, taking place globally, comprise important background context to the viewpoints of British citizens, including Muslims, particularly when individuals may have members of families living in zones of conflict around the world. As such, when engaging with Muslim communities, particularly individuals who may be political activists working to achieve social justice globally, part of the process involves discussion around these kinds of complex questions. Therefore, it is essential for practitioners working within a counter-terrorism context to accept and to allow space for a broad conceptualisation of the notion of grievance, something which the model of NP, as suggested within CONTEST 2, is in danger of too narrowly defining. The difficulty therefore with a narrowly defined understanding of ‘grievance’ and with the assertion of value judgements regarding ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ channels of grievance is that the government appears to be attempting to control and influence the ways in which Muslim identities and practices are to be expressed in British society. This highly assimilationist approach to community engagement presents a further challenge when placed in the context of counter-terrorism.

### **War on Terror as a War on Islam**

Another important aspect of our research findings is the impact of perceptions relating counter-terrorism with a threat to Islam as a religion, and Muslims as believers. Research participants talked about how, from its conception, the ‘War on Terror’ has been perceived by many as a war on Islam, causing reluctance within Muslim communities to help the police. Some participants related this to what they saw as a mistake on the part of the British government in following American rhetoric within counter-terrorism discourse, when the remit of police work is based on public safety rather than political standpoints. The research therefore suggests that one of the main reasons why some Muslims have not taken a proactive role in supporting counter-terrorism efforts has been the British role in the highly contested ‘War on Terror’ – a synonym for a war on Islam in many minds. Nonetheless, it may be the case – as illustrated by the plethora of community driven projects relating to the issues – that there is space for understanding the prevention of violent extremism as a matter of public and community and individual safety rather than as a political issue. Through dialogue, ongoing engagement and partnership work it may be possible for police to gain greater community support for tackling violent

extremism, particularly if the criminal aspects to terrorism are stressed. However, the continued dominance of the 'War on Terror' narrative within CONTEST 2, particularly through its focus on 'New Terror', places significant challenges and potential tensions for police and community members. In addition, the focus on 'shared values' and 'legitimate grievances' contributes to the image of policy as enabling terror crime prevention work to potentially be used as a way of controlling the expression of Muslim identities. As such CONTEST 2 may further alienate large sections of Muslim communities, making prevention work all the more difficult and challenging. In this context, police engagement with communities will need to focus even more on building long-term relations of trust, mutual understanding and partnership with Muslim communities in general, and in particular with the most peripheral, whose knowledge of violent extremism, and experiences in grassroots intervention are so often most applicable to the objectives of counter-terrorism work.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the shift within British counter-terrorism towards a value-orientated principle by which government seeks to promote or delegitimise certain religious, social and political standpoints of Muslim citizens, and the impact on communities that this has and may continue to have. While it has been important to discuss the concept of values and grievance as problematic terms in themselves, our main purpose has been to explore the intersection of counterterrorism policy with the practice of effective community engagement as illustrated by our research data. Broadly, the pivotal issue is one of strategy and purpose: how best to prevent potential and terminate actual terrorist plots, which from all perspectives needs the active co-operation from communities themselves. In this context, government appears to have chosen a somewhat robust assimilationist approach, using highly generalised concepts of legitimate expressions of religious beliefs and political ideologies. Problematically, the use of ill-defined and homogenising vocabulary within policy discourse, not only acts to stigmatise large proportions of Muslim communities, but results in disengagement. In contrast, police officers working within counter-terrorism appear to be achieving some success through a more inclusive approach, which not only seeks to engage the most effective, if not always government sanctioned groups, along with seeking a long-term aim of building trust, communication, reliable intelligence and community partners. However, CONTEST 2, through its focus on 'shared values' continues to problematise and stigmatise Muslim identities as potentially anti-social and extreme, negatively impacting upon any positive engagement and partnership work that may be taking place between the police and communities.

## **Notes**

1 The study was undertaken by Basia Spalek, Salwa El-Awa and Laura Zahra McDonald, at the University of Birmingham, with Robert Lambert, MBE, University of St Andrews and University of Exeter, acting as a consultant. I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council Religion and Society programme for funding the research study presented here, reference AH/F008112/1.

2 The concept of 'ummah' might be thought of as comprising a global Islamic community that supersedes national or ethnic identities.

3 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/06/politics.uk>

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